

# Where Have All the Slaughterhouses Gone?

With an ever-growing consumer demand for fresh, local products, the production process is having a hard time keeping up

By JUDY LIBERSON



With consumers focused on getting the best local products available, the boundaries of purchasing have been stretched beyond realistic fulfillment. Just because we as buyers are interested in purchasing nearby, as within a 100-150 mile radius, it does not mean that these products will always be readily available. We are needier and demand a continuation of the high-quality products we have come to cherish.

Take the issue of fresh local meats. While farmers could raise more animals to meet the demand, the lack of butchering capacity is a major stumbling block. As Alan Zuschlag of Touchstone Farm in Rappahannock County so aptly describes the dilemma: “Not everyone is standing in line to train as a butcher.” This is not a new problem for the Piedmont, an area that at one time had 50-60 slaughterhouses and has only added one new one in the past 20 years! What’s more, production facilities have such high demand that they more and more frequently turn down perfectly good clients.

This is not just a Piedmont problem as articles in both the *New York Times* and the *LA Times* so aptly describe similar situations on their respective coasts. Nationally, demand for top quality, local products far exceeds the possible production. Locavore consumers want nearby, fresh, antibiotic-free foods. The problem is, while the supply and demand are there, the production is not.

These days, consumers are more interested in their food’s life style and life cycle. Farmers now are routinely asked detailed questions about their animals that years ago would never have been broached. Consumers, Zuschlag explains, want the specifics: They want to know about the treatment of the animal, and where it has lived and existed. “They want a connection with the farmer and the producer and do not want to think of the animals being shipped hundreds of miles away,” he says. Zuschlag happily recognizes that

his animals do not suffer the hardships of long distances that produce greater stress.

## Touchstone Farm: A Case Study in Fulfilling Demand While Maintaining High Standards

How does one move from a career Civil Service position to gentleman farmer with a specialized product? Through his work with rural development projects and as an economist by education, Zuschlag believed he could apply his experience in international rural areas to his new venture, Touchstone Farm. That idea some 14 years ago has evolved into a major business that focuses on maintaining the rural farming landscape in the country. He started with just 25 acres and now has 110 with the hopes of increasing the pasture to more than 200 acres. “I can raise sheep the right way, and do it on a medium scale, but the real bottleneck is the slaughterhouse.”

Zuschlag believes lamb provides its own challenges as many consumers are confused by preparation methods. His sheep at Touchstone Farm are **Clun Forest sheep**, a breed known for being easy lambers and often bearers of twins. He calls them good mothers who raise nice, healthy, and robust lambs. They are 100 percent grass-fed (perennial rye, orchard grass, and various clovers), and the Farm is the first sheep farm in the country to be **certified humane** ([www.certifiedhumane.com](http://www.certifiedhumane.com)).

What does this all mean to us the end user? First of all, it means no antibiotics or hormones have been administered, and secondly, that the animals have ample room to live and grow — they are free roamers who have a good life. Zuschlag said finding a butcher with the same passion and belief system was difficult. He first used one in Fauquier County but quickly learned that his skills did not meet his expectations or agree with his supply standards and philosophy.





Clun Forest sheep happily roam the fields of Touchstone Farm.

Today, Touchstone Farm uses **Blue Ridge Meats** ([www.blueridgemeats.com](http://www.blueridgemeats.com)) in Front Royal, a business that is also certified humane — it is the only slaughter facility in the area, in fact, to hold this honor. This time, however, Zuschlag is faced with the butcher's increasing popularity given the increase in popularity for local, certified-humane food. Demand for Blue Ridge Meats' services is so popular that scheduling requires a four-to-six-month out commitment. This proves a challenging feat considering that it's sometimes difficult to know when an animal is ready, let alone the fact that most consumers don't think about purchasing their food a year out (unless they become members of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group). Still Zuschlag continues to be an advocate for Blue Ridge Meats, calling it a mom-and-pop operation that employs a dozen people, serves an assortment of farms, and operates with the highest standards.

### Challenges and Solutions

The number of neighborhood processors continues to shrink. Many closed because they could not modernize and meet the newer and tighter USDA regulations. With a single slaughter facility, Zuschlag says Blue Ridge Meats cannot always accommodate him: "They are the schedule keepers, and we need to be organized to meet their schedules. It's very difficult to figure out how many lambs we will have a year in advance. If we meet these numbers earlier, we cannot just show up and say, now."

There's also the cost issue in eating locally with purchases from small-scale suppliers. Remember Zuschlag is talking about his business with 100 ewes when a big sheep farm may have a stock of 100,000. Consumers often look at the price and then see the price of Australian lamb, which may cost half as much as the lamb from a smaller sheep farm. The consumer may not want to eat locally at

two times the price for a product that has been poorly processed and is available only at limited times of the year.

Finding Blue Ridge Meats was a positive first step for Zuschlag and his farm. Another was his formation in 2008 of a cooperative with three nearby farmers (Brindabella Farm, Stoney Meadows Farm, and Oak Forest Farm), who raised the same Clun Forest breed of sheep and were also certified humane. They, too, were experiencing similar slaughterhouse challenges so to find solutions to them they joined forces. Together they formed **Rappahannock Farms** ([www.rappfarmsva.com](http://www.rappfarmsva.com)) and use the **Rappahannock Natural Foods Coop** ([www.rnf.coop](http://www.rnf.coop)) in Sperryville as the distributor. This strategy of combining output enables them to meet more customer needs. Together, they created a multi-tiered system of ordering including custom purchasing and pre-packaged products.

Last year, Zuschlag purchased a sizable walk-in freezer to help him meet the needs of individuals who cannot plan a year out or are not interested in large-scale purchases. These customers can call ahead and get the product they want. For the first time, Zuschlag can sell by the piece, which, he says, "enables them to extend the season to accommodate the last-minute purchase, but customers need to understand we are not a supermarket."

### Local No More?

The supreme irony is we have created a love for fresh, local, organic, and humane goods, but we do not have the manpower to make this romance a long-sustaining reality. Zuschlag believes that the Piedmont can continue to thrive as a foodshed with its great climate and food and wine paradise, but infrastructural issues will continue to torment and could keep consumers undersupplied. He believes that a little government support would go a long way in sustaining the interest that has been created. ■